

Leveraging Quality of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Oman through Accreditation

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the efforts taken to leverage the quality of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in Oman. Oman is facing an imbalance between, the large number of graduates produced by HEIs and the inability of the employers to provide employment, as they believe that the graduates are inadequately prepared for the workplace. This drove the need to ensure that higher education institutions were producing employable graduates. The government recognised the need for quality assurance mechanisms to regulate the higher education sector and responded to the need by establishing an external quality assurance agency to assure the quality of higher education institutions and programs through institutional and program accreditation. It is mandatory for all HEIs in Oman to undergo both institutional and program accreditation.

Keywords: Accreditation, Higher Education, Quality Assurance, Oman.

INTRODUCTION

Accreditation processes have become drivers of change in the higher education sector, as it encourages HEIs to identify and address their priorities. Accreditation is defined as a process of external quality review to assess higher education institutions for quality assurance and quality improvement [1]. Expansion, privatization, internationalisation and globalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) have generated a growing need to assure quality of education. Universities and Colleges have become accountable to a number of stakeholders including students, employers, parents and the government. Receiving accreditation status is a way of assuring that the higher education institution has met the prescribed minimum quality assurance standards.

Evolution of Higher Education in Oman

Higher education in Oman is relatively young compared to the rest of the world. A legal framework based on the Royal Decrees of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos governs Oman's higher education provision [2]. Education in Oman started in the seventies and the first University was started in the eighties. Oman realised that the dependency on oil has to be reduced when the oil prices started to decline in the nineties and hence started to diversify its economy. It was agreed that education should play a key role in diversifying the national economy and to create jobs

for the fast growing youth population. Hence higher education became the gateway to Oman's future aspirations. Oman's strategic development document Oman Vision 2020, emphasised a shift from the public to private higher education that is from a state-funded, cost free higher education to private owned, cost recovery higher education [3]. To cater to growing industry needs and to provide higher education to the youth population, Oman had to promote transnational higher education by importing diploma and degree programs from other countries like United Kingdom, United States, Canada, India and Germany. As a result, Oman has a diverse range of quality assurance mechanisms and there arose a need to contextualise them to the needs of Oman [4].

Oman's vision 2020 ensured that education will remain central to Oman's growth and also emphasised on upgrading education services to meet international standards [5]. In response to this need, the Oman Academic Council (OAC) was established through a Royal Decree in 2001. In order to provide autonomy to the Oman Academic Council, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) replaced the Oman Accreditation Council in 2010 through a Royal Decree. Item (C) of Article 8 of the regulations of the Royal Decree No 54/2010 states that one of the tasks of OAAA is to accredit higher education institutions against relevant standards established for that purpose [6]. In accordance with the good practice of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), OAAA recognises that the responsibility of quality and quality assurance rests on the higher education institution itself [7].

Institutional and Program Accreditation

The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) is the national external quality assurance agency in Oman, established through a Royal Decree in 2001, and is responsible for both Institutional Accreditation and Program Accreditation. The Royal Decree stated that OAAA is responsible for ensuring that higher education institutions meet international standards and also to encourage higher education institutions to improve their internal quality [8].

In order to meet this mandate, OAAA developed a two-stage institutional accreditation system as shown in figure 1. The first stage in the accreditation process is Quality Audit. Quality Audit evaluates the effectiveness of the system and processes through which a HEI achieves its mission and vision. The result of a quality audit is formative in nature. The HEIs undergo Quality Audit only once [9].

The second stage in the Institutional Accreditation process is the Institutional Standards Assessment. Institutional Standards Assessment assesses a HEI against set standards and criteria. The HEI is expected to undergo an Institutional Standards Assessment (ISA) four years after the Quality Audit. The focus of the ISA is on evaluating whether an HEI has met a set of internationally benchmarked standards. The results of the ISA are summative in nature. Five years after the initial accreditation, the HEI is expected to undergo the ISA again to maintain their accreditation status [8].

Institutional Program Accreditation is the assurance that a particular program has been evaluated and that its contents and quality meet the minimum prescribed standards. In Oman, HEIs should

have undergone Institutional Accreditation prior to Program Accreditation. Programs offered by affiliate universities also have to undergo Program Accreditation. Currently, the Program Standards are under development. The Quality Audits in Oman commenced in the year 2008. The first round of the second stage, the Institutional Standards Assessment will commence early 2016.

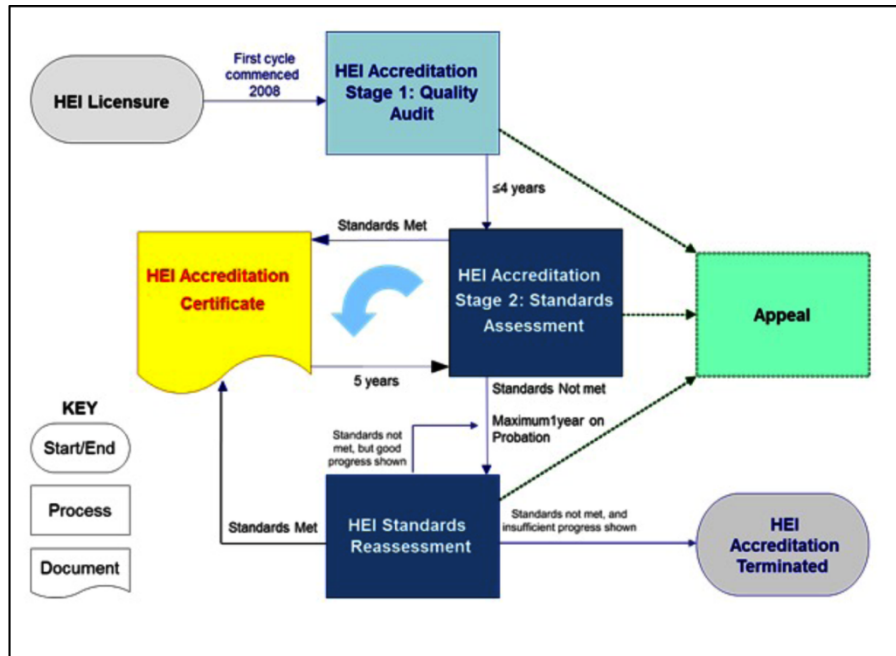


Fig. 1: Institutional Accreditation System [7, p.14]

Institutional Accreditation Process Overview

The Stage 1 Quality Audit has two key elements as shown in Figure 2. First is the self-study conducted by the HEI undergoing the Quality Audit, which results in a portfolio that is submitted to OAAA. HEIs were encouraged to use the process of ADRI (Approach – Deployment – Result – Improvement) when writing the Portfolio. The second is the external review that is conducted by an external Audit Panel comprising of international and national experts. The Panel verifies the claims that are in the Portfolio through a process of triangulation and saturation by means interviews and crosschecking the documents submitted. The report consists of Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations. Four years after the Quality Audit, the HEI is expected to undergo the Stage 2 of the process.

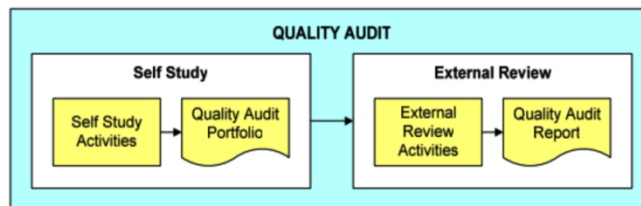


Fig. 2: Stage 1 – Quality Audit Overview [9, p.14]

The stage two of the HEI Accreditation, Institutional Standards Assessment has three key elements as shown in Figure 3. First is the self-assessment that is undertaken by the HEI of its own processes and practices against the standards and criteria set. The HEI writes the findings in an Institutional Standards Assessment Application. The second is the external review that is conducted by an external Panel comprising of international and national experts. The Panel verifies the claims that are in the Portfolio through a process of triangulation and saturation by means interviews and crosschecking the documents submitted. This results in an Assessment Report that is summative in nature and provides an Accreditation status of the HEI.

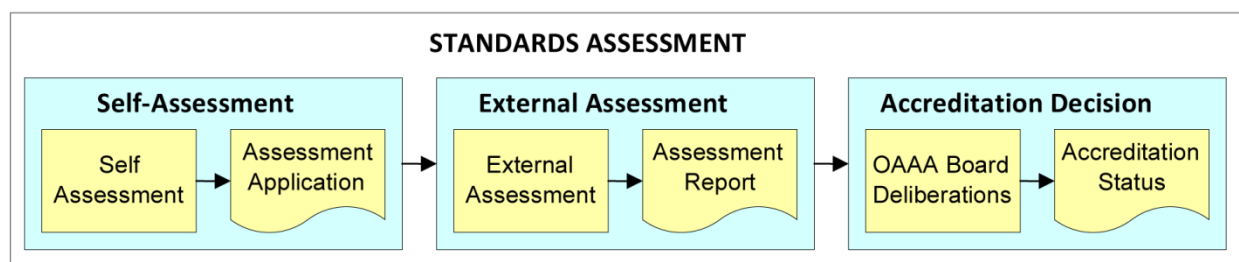


Fig. 3: Stage 2 - Standards Assessment Overview [8, p.18]

Scope of Accreditation

Accreditation criteria are the standards of quality through which OAAA determines if the HEI has met the prescribed requirements. Quality Audit focuses on nine broad areas as given below which is mirrored in the Institutional Standards Assessment.

- Governance and Management
- Student Learning by Coursework Programs
- Student Learning by Research Programs
- Staff Research and Consultancy
- Industry and Community Engagement
- Academic Support Services
- Students and Student Support Services
- Staff and Staff Support Practices
- General Support Services and Facilities.

The nine areas in a quality audit further comprise of sub areas, which are explained in the Quality Audit Manual [9].

Institutional Standards Assessment has 9 standards, 79 criteria and a number of indicators. The outcomes of the criteria are Met, Partially Met and Not Met. All nine Standards have to be Met for a HEI to be accredited. In order for the Standards to be Met, all related criteria has to be Met. In some cases, up to two standards can be Partially Met and the standard may be considered to be Met. The Standards are rated as Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory and Not Applicable. The Accreditation Outcomes are: Accredited with Distinction/ Merit, Accredited, On Probation and Not Accredited. [8, p 65-68]

Challenges faced and Lessons Learnt from Quality Audits

The first cycle of the Institutional Standards Assessment has almost been completed. 55 HEIs have undergone Stage one, Quality Audit. The Quality Audits explored the commitment of a HEIs mission towards the stakeholders (fitness of purpose) and the extent to which the HEI fulfills its mission (fitness for purpose). Quality Audits in Oman saw a shift where HEIs moved from a compliance culture to a culture where the HEI takes responsibility for its own quality assurance systems [10].

Feedback received from the sector on the Quality Audit has been both positive and critical. In general, HEIs perceived the Audit Reports to be fair, balanced and professional, though there has been some dissatisfaction in the number of affirmations and recommendations. HEIs have appreciated that the reports were helpful in developing their internal quality assurance mechanisms. HEIs have been critical about the time taken by OAAA to issue the Audit Reports and this needs to be addressed in Stage 2 [10].

One of OAAA's concern is that most of the Portfolios received were descriptive in nature and it is not clear to OAAA whether it is the unwillingness of the sector to submit an honest self-review or if the sector lacks the skill to self reflect, though as part of capacity building, National Quality Training Program was provided to the higher education sector to develop necessary knowledge and skills to improve their internal quality and to critically evaluate themselves to write the self-study portfolio [9]. Another challenge faced by the OAAA was plagiarism in the submission of the portfolio. As a result a plagiarism policy was developed and workshops on academic integrity were delivered to the support the sector [10].

The lessons learnt from the Quality Audit are; the importance of a consultative approach with the higher education sector during the designing, development and implementation process; contextualising the quality assurance approaches to the Omani higher education sector; providing support to the sector through workshops and training; and providing feedback to the sector to support continuous quality improvement [10]. Capacity building and training needs to be a critical component in developing the higher education sector to meet international standards.

Development of Institutional and Program Standards Assessment

The challenges faced and the lessons learnt provided useful input during the development of the Institutional and Program Standards Assessment. The development of the Standards Assessment was based on best international practices through benchmarking with a number of regional and international quality assurance agencies and was contextualised to ensure that the standards are appropriate to the requirements of Oman. These rationales, principles and procedures are documented in the Conceptual Design Framework (CDF) of Institutional Standards [11].

The OAAA also conducted extensive stakeholder consultation to elicit feedback on the draft standards. A national symposium was conducted where a number of stakeholders were invited to provide feedback. Confidential Pilot Institutional and Program Standards Assessment on HEIs on a voluntary basis was conducted to further refine the draft versions to ensure that it was fit for purpose [11]. The Institutional Standards Assessments are due to start early 2016.

CONCLUSION

Accreditation processes provides external push for continuous quality improvement and enhancement within the HEI. Accreditation offers external levers to internal institutional change when there is an alignment of internal goals for quality assurance and external standards enforced [12]. Higher Education Sector in Oman is in its early stages of development. Knowledge is seen as the power that can shape economy. The ability of a country to produce and use knowledge determines its growth. A knowledge driven growth requires high quality education systems to prepare a well trained workforce that generates growth. Oman recognizes that higher education plays a key role in generating a knowledge economy and recognizes that assuring the quality of higher education is vital to the growth of the nation.

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Hannah holds Mechanical Engineering degree and Masters in Business Administration. She has more than 15 years of experience in the field of quality assurance in higher education. Prior to joining OAAA, she worked as a lecturer and also held senior positions in two Higher Education Institutions in Muscat as Head of Quality Assurance Department. She had a major role in the oversight of higher education provision supporting the Colleges in the development and implementation of quality management systems. This included supporting in the validation of higher education courses by the Affiliate University in UK and in the QAA Overseas Quality Audit by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), UK. She also plays a key role in supporting the higher education sector of Oman as Executive Committee Member in the Oman Quality Network for Higher Education (OQNHE).

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